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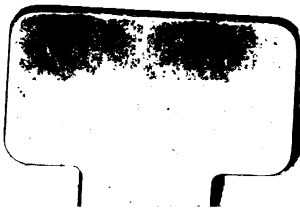
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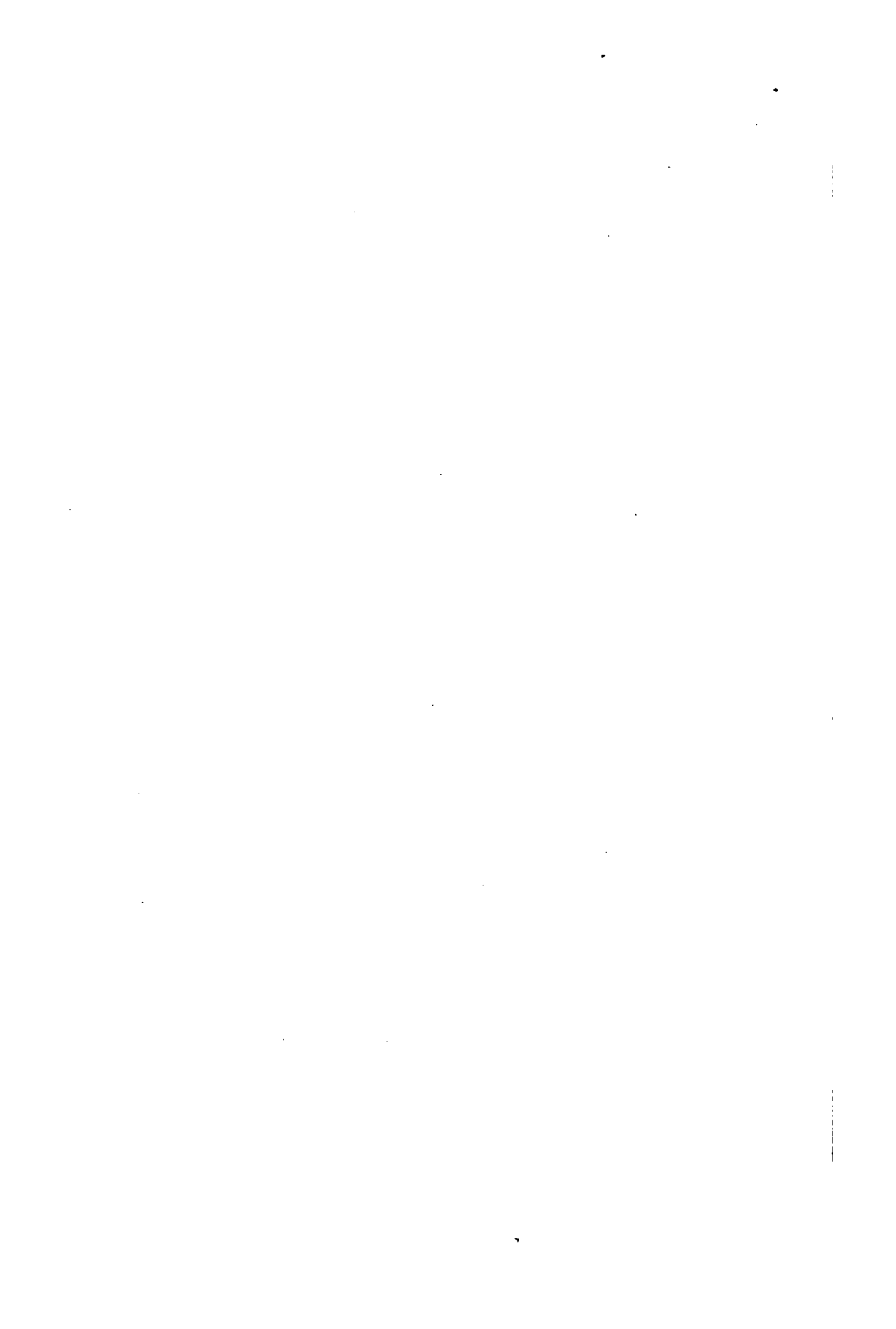
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DEATH;

1683

A

SEATONIAN PRIZE POEM.

BY

BEILBY PORTEUS, M. A.

NOW LORD BISHOP OF LONDON.

A NEW EDITION, WITH A PREFACE AND NOTES.



*Gough Add
Cmbr.
p. 58*

TO WHICH IS ADDED,

AN EPITAPH

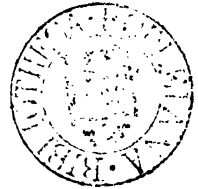
ON

KING GEORGE THE SECOND,

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.



LONDON,



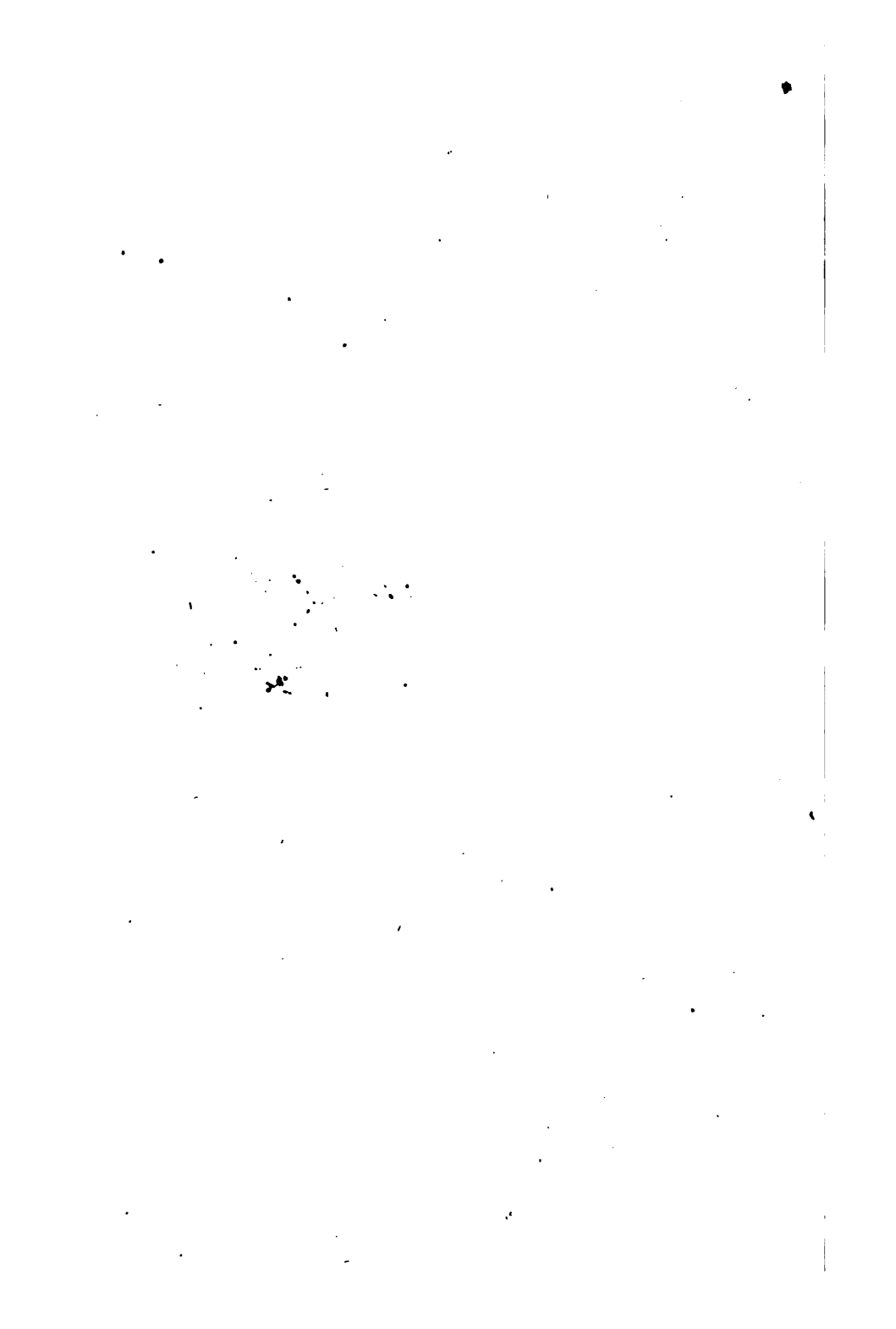
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6.



PREFACE.

MR. Seaton bequeathed to the University of Cambridge the rents of his Killingsbury estate, now producing clear 40l. per annum, to be given yearly to that Master of Arts who shall write the best English Poem on a sacred subject. The Vice-chancellor, the Master of Clare Hall, and the Greek Professor, (who are the disposers of this premium,) determine the subject. The Poem is to be printed, and the expence deducted out of the product of the estate. The remainder is given as a reward to the composer*.

* Raworth's Cambridge University Calendar, 51.

The present Poem obtained the prize in the year 1759, and it has always been esteemed by competent judges as one of the best pieces produced by that Institution.

On a subject so beaten by antient and modern poets as human mortality, it is obvious that new ideas or new images can scarcely occur to the most vigorous imagination. When, therefore, we meet with descriptions and sentiments that are familiar to us, and can trace the same to corresponding ones in the works of other poets, it would be unjust to charge the parallel as a proof of plagiarism. Even MILTON himself, whose immortal epic, next to the Sacred Volume, appears to have been chiefly read by the author of this Poem, even that mighty genius has adopted liberally the noble similies and descriptions of HOMER, though he has, in every instance, improved vastly upon his original.

The description of the Cave of Death, which opens this nightpiece, is highly poetical and solemn. The “unsubstantial majesty,” of the King of Terrors, is a just appropriation of our great bard’s description of the same object :

————— black it stood as night,
Fierce as ten furies, terrible as Hell,
And shook a dreadful dart : what seem’d his head
The likeness of a kingly crown had on.

In the employment of Sin, pointing and evenoming the stings of Death, there is a beautiful personification of the Apostle's assertion, that *the Sting of Death is Sin*, and an improvement of Milton's sublime description of the Sorceress at the gate of Hell. The ministers of Death are forcibly characterized, and without that accumulation of epithets, which renders poetical description oftentimes turgid and obscure.

After such a review of evils, an apostrophe to the Creator, however bold, was natural; and it is expressed with great strength and elegance.

This happily introduces the scripture history of the origin of Evil, which vindicates God from being its author, and makes Man the cause of his own misery.

The picture of patriarchal longevity, is exquisitely coloured :

————— In sober state
 Through the sequester'd vale of rural life
 The venerable Patriarch guileless held
 The tenour of his way.

This description reminds one of Virgil's admired contrast of the Court and Country Life :

O Fortunatos nimium, &c.

On the subject of War, the author is very happy and
 A 4 highly

highly animated; and there is something particularly striking and original in the figure of *Death exulting on the embattled plain, and clapping his raven wings*. This is in the true spirit of poesy. From the carnage of war, the transition to Luxury is well managed, and seasonable. The allegory of Youth sailing down the smooth stream of Life is finely drawn, and has many of the beauties without the obscurity of Horace's famed allegory :

O navis, referent in mare te novi
Fluctus, &c.

There is great strength of reasoning in the remonstrance against Suicide; and the address to the unhappy Man meditating his own destruction, is very tender, solemn and affecting.

Milton has represented the varying power of Death in a remarkable manner when opposed to Satan :

So spake the grisly terror, and in shape,
So speaking and so threat'ning, grew tenfold
More dreadful and deform.

Our author, in the Poem before us, has successfully adopted the same idea to express the extraordinary devastations of the king of terrors :

———— In no common form
Death then appears, but starting into size
Enormous, measures with gigantic stride
Th' astonish'd earth, and from his looks throws round
Unutterable terror and dismay.

The prosopopœia of the *astonish'd earth*, is very happy and characteristic of that general dismay occasioned by uncommon instances of mortality.

In the description of the effects produced by the dreadful looks of Death, we are again reminded of Milton, who describes Satan as a Comet portentous of public calamities, according to the old opinion :

————— On th' other side
 Incens'd with indignation Satan stood
 Unterrify'd ; and like a comet burn'd
 That fires the length of Ophiuchus huge,
 In th' Arctic sky, and from his *borrid air*
Shakes pestilence and war.

But the finest instance of the prosopopœia in the present Poem, unquestionably is that of the Pestilence ; and it is wrought up with uncommon accuracy and beauty.

————— At dead of night
 In sullen silence stalks forth Pestilence ;
 Contagion close behind taints all her steps
 With pois'nous dew ; no smiting hand is seen,
 No sound is heard, but soon her secret path
 Is marked with desolation : **heaps on heaps**
 Promiscuous drop. No friend, no refuge near ;
 All, all is false and treach'rous around ;
 All that they touch, or taste, or breathe, is Death.

The idea of contagion tainting the steps of the destroyer, is exquisitely beautiful ; and the whole picture is a perfect description of the physical ravages made by this awful judgement of Heaven.

Nor is the description which follows, of an earthquake, drawn with less judgement, or wrought up with less force of colouring.

The prayer to the Deity is affecting, and most judiciously closes the piece :

————— At thy good time
 Let Death approach ; I reck not—let him but come
 In genuine form, not with thy vengeance arm'd,
 Too much for man to bear.

There is a charming application of scripture language in the address to the Redeemer, as being led from Heaven by soft-eyed Pity. And the prayer to him for faith in the dying hour, is expressed with great energy and poetic beauty.

DEATH;

A

SEATONIAN PRIZE POEM.

FRIEND to the wretch whom every friend forsakes,
woo thee, Death ! In fancy's fairy paths
let the gay songster rove, and gently trill
the strain of empty joy. Life and its joys
leave to those that prize them. At this hour, 5
this solemn hour, when silence rules the world,
and wearied nature makes a gen'ral pause ;
Wrapt in night's sable robe, through cloysters drear
And

And charnel~~s~~ pale, tenanted by a throng
 Of meagre phantoms shooting cross my path
 With silent glance, I seek the shadowy vale
 Of Death. Deep in a murky cave's recess,
 Lav'd by Oblivion's listless stream, and fenc'd
 By shelving rocks, and intermingled horrors
 Of yew and cypress shade, from all intrusion
 Of busy noontide beam, the Monarch sits
 In unsubstantial majesty enthron'd *.
 At his right hand, nearest himself in place
 And frightfulness of form, his parent Sin
 With fatal industry and cruel care
 Busies herself in pointing all his stings,
 And tipping every shaft with venom drawn
 From her infernal store: around him, rang'd
 In terrible array, and mixture strange
 Of uncouth shapes, stand his dread Ministers.
 Foremost Old Age, his natural ally
 And firmest friend: next him Diseases thick,
 A motley train; Fever, with cheek of fire;
 Consumption wan; Palsy, half warm with life,

A

* Milton's Paradise Lost, Book II. 673.

and half a clay-cold lump; joint-tort'ring Gout, 30
 and ever-gnawing Rheum; Convulsion wild!
 voln Dropsy; panting Asthma; Apoplex
 all-gorg'd. There too the Pestilence that walks
 in darkness, and the Sickness that destroys
 the broad noon-day*. These, and a thousand more, 35
 horrid to tell, attentive wait; and, when
 by Heaven's command Death waves his ebon wand,
 sudden rush forth to execute his purpose,
 and scatter desolation o'er the earth.

Un-fated man, for whom such various forms 40
 of misery wait, and mark their future prey!
 Ah! why, all-righteous Father, didst thou make
 his creature, Man? why wake th' unconscious dust
 to life and wretchedness? O better far
 till had he slept in uncreated night, 45
 than this the lot of Being! Was it for this
 thy Breath divine kindled within his breast
 the vital flame? For this was thy fair image
 stamp'd on his soul in godlike lineaments †?
 For this dominion giv'n him absolute 50
 O'er

* Psalm xci. 6.

† Gen. i. 27, 28.

O'er all thy works, only that he might reign
 Supreme in woe? From the blest source of good
 Could Pain and Death proceed? Could such foul ill
 Fall from fair Mercy's hands? Far be the thought,
 The impious thought! God never made a creature
 But what was good. He made a *living Soul*;
The wretched Mortal was the work of Man.
 Forth from his Maker's hands he sprung to life,
 Fresh with immortal bloom; no pain he knew,
 No fear of change, no check to his desires,
 Save one command. That one command, which stood
 'Twixt him and Death, the test of his obedience,
 Urg'd on by wanton curiosity,
 He broke*. There in one moment was undone
 The fairest of God's works. The same rash hand,
 That pluck'd in evil hour the fatal fruit,
 Unbarr'd the gates of Hell, and let loose Sin
 And Death, and all the family of Pain,
 To prey upon Mankind. Young Nature saw
 The monstrous crew, and shook thro' all her frame.
 Then fled her new-born lustre, then began
Heaven

* Genesis iii. 6.

Heaven's chearful face to low'r, then vapours choak'd
 The troubled air, and form'd a veil of clouds
 To hide the willing Sun *. The earth, convuls'd
 With painful throes, threw forth a bristly crop 75
 Of thorns and briars! and Insect, Bird, and Beast,
 That wont before with admiration fond
 To gaze at Man, and fearless crowd around him,
 Now fled before his face, shunning in haste
 Th' infection of his misery. He alone, 80
 Who justly might, th' offended Lord of Man,
 Turn'd not away his face; he, full of pity,
 Forsook not in this uttermost distress
 His best lov'd work. That comfort still remain'd
 (That best, that greatest comfort in affliction) 85
 The countenance of God; and thro' the gloom
 Shot forth some kindly gleams, to cheer and warm
 Th' offender's sinking soul. Hope sent from Heav'n,
 Uprais'd his drooping head, and shew'd afar
 A happier scene of things; the promis'd Seed 90
 Trampling upon the Serpent's humbled crest †;
 Death of his sting disarm'd; and the dark grave
Made

* Milton's Paradise Lost, B. IX, 1000. † Gen. iii. 15.

Made pervious to the realms of endless day,
 No more the limit but the gate of life *.
 Cheer'd with the view, Man went to till the ground, 9
 From whence he rose; sentenc'd indeed to toil
 As to a punishment, yet (ev'n in wrath,
 So merciful is Heav'n †) this toil became
 The solace of his woes, the sweet employ
 Of many a live-long hour, and surest guard 100
 Against Disease and Death. Death, tho' denounc'd,
 Was yet a distant ill, by feeble arm
 Of Age, his sole support, led slowly on.
 Not then, as since, the short-liv'd sons of men
 Flock'd to his realms in countless multitudes; 105
 Scarce in the course of twice five hundred years
 One solitary ghost went shiv'ring down
 To his unpeopled shore. In sober state,
 Through the sequester'd vale of rural life,
 The venerable Patriarch guileless held 110
 The tenour of his way; Labour prepar'd
 His simple fare, and Temp'rance rul'd his board.
 Tir'd with his daily toil, at early eve

H

* Cor. xv. 54, 55.

† Habak. iii. 2.

He sunk to sudden rest ; gentle and pure
 As breath of evening Zephyr, and as sweet, 115
 Were all his slumbers ; with the Sun he rose,
 Alert and vigorous as He, to run
 His destin'd course*. Thus nerv'd with giant strength,
 He stemm'd the tide of time, and stood the shock
 Of ages rolling harmless o'er his head. 120
 At life's meridian point arriv'd he stood,
 And looking round, saw all the vallies fill'd
 With nations from his loins ; full-well content
 To leave his race thus scatter'd o'er the earth,
 Along the gentle slope of life's decline 125
 He bent his gradual way, till full of years
 He dropp'd like mellow fruit into his grave †.

Such in the infancy of Time was Man ;
 So calm was life, so impotent was Death !
 O had he but preserv'd these few remains, 130
 The shatter'd fragments of lost happiness,
 Snatch'd by the hand of Heav'n from the sad wreck
 Of innocence primæval ; still had he liv'd
 In ruin great ; tho' fall'n, yet not forlorn ;

B

Though

Though mortal, yet not every where beset 135
 With Death in every shape ! But he, impatient
 To be completely wretched, hastes to fill up
 The measure of his woes. 'Twas man himself
 Brought Death into the world ; and Man himself
 Gave keenness to his darts, quicken'd his pace, 140
 And multiply'd destruction on mankind.

First Envy, eldest-born of Hell, embrued
 Her hands in blood, and taught the Sons of Men
 To make a Death which Nature never made
 And God abhorr'd; with violence rude to break 145
 The thread of life ere half its length was run,
 And rob a wretched brother of his being.
 With joy Ambition saw, and soon improv'd
 The execrable deed. 'Twas not enough
 By subtle fraud to snatch a single life: 150
 Puny impiety ! whole kingdoms fell
 To sate the lust of power : more horrid still,
 The foulest stain and scandal of our nature
 Became its boast. *One Murder made a Villain,*
Millions a Hero. Princes were privileged 155
 To kill ; and numbers sanctifi'd the crime.
 Ah ! why will Kings forget that they are Men ?

And

And Men that they are brethren? Why delight
 In human sacrifice? Why burst the ties
 Of Nature, that should knit their souls together 160
 In one soft bond of amity and love?

Yet still they breathe destruction, still go on
 Inhumanly ingenious to find out
 New pains for life, new terrors for the grave,
 Artificers of Death! Still Monarchs dream 165
 Of universal empire growing up
 From universal ruin. Blast the design
 Great God of Hosts, nor let thy creatures fall
 Unpitied victims at Ambition's shrine!

Yet say, should Tyrants learn at last to feel, 170
 And the loud din of battle cease to bray;
 Should dove-ey'd Peace o'er all the earth extend
 Her olive branch, and give the world repose,
 Would Death be foil'd? Would health, and strength,
 and youth

Defy his pow'r? Has he no arts in store, 175
 No other shafts, save those of war? Alas!
 Ev'n in the smile of Peace, that smile which sheds
 A heav'nly sunshine o'er the soul, there basks
 That serpent Luxury. War its thousands slays,

Peace its ten thousands*. In th' embattled plain 180
 Tho' Death exults, and claps his raven wings,
 Yet reigns he not ev'n there so absolute,
 So merciless, as in yon frantic scenes
 Of midnight revel and tumultuous mirth,
 Where in th' intoxicating draught conceal'd, 185
 Or couch'd beneath the glance of lawless love,
 He snares the simple youth, who nought suspecting,
 Means to be blest—but finds himself undone.
 Down the smooth stream of life the stripling darts,
 Gay as the morn; bright glows the vernal sky, 190
 Hope swells his sails, and passion steers his course.
 Safe glides his little bark along the shore
 Where virtue takes her stand; but if too far
 He launches forth beyond Discretion's mark,
 Sudden the tempest scowls, the surges roar, 195
 Blot his fair day, and plunge him in the deep.
 O sad but sure mischance! O happier far
 To lie like gallant Howe † 'midst Indian wilds

A

* 1 Samuel, xviii. 7.

† George Augustus Viscount Howe, who was killed by the Indians in North America, in 1758; by which event the title devolved to his brother, the late Admiral Earl Howe.

A breathless corse, cut off by savage hands
 In earliest prime, a generous sacrifice 200
 To Freedom's holy cause, than so to fall,
 Torn immature from life's meridian joys,
 A prey to Vice, Intemp'rance, and Disease.

Yet die ev'n thus, thus rather perish still,
 Ye Sons of Pleasure, by th' Almighty stricken, 205
 Than ever dare (though oft, alas! ye dare)
 To lift against yourselves the murd'rous steel,
 To wrest from God's own hand the sword of Justice,
 And be your own avengers! Hold, rash Man!
 Though with anticipating speed thou'st rang'd 210
 Through every region of delight, nor left
 One joy to gild the evening of thy days:
 Though life seem one uncomfortable void,
 Guilt at thy heels, before thy face despair;
 Yet gay this scene, and light this load of woe, 215
 Compar'd with thy hereafter. Think, O think,
 And, ere thou plunge into the vast abyss,
 Pause on the verge a while, look down and see
 Thy future mansion. Why that start of horror?
 From thy slack hand why drops th' uplifted steel? 220
 Didst thou not think such vengeance must await

The wretch that, with his crimes all fresh about him,
 Rushes irreverent, unprepar'd, uncall'd,
 Into his Maker's presence, throwing back
 With insolent disdain his choicest gift? 225

Live then, while Heav'n in pity lends thee life,
 And think it all too short to wash away,
 By penitential tears and deep contrition,
 The scarlet of thy crimes. So shalt thou find
 Rest to thy soul; so unappall'd shalt meet 230
 Death when he comes, not wantonly invite
 His ling'ring stroke. Be it thy sole concern
 With innocence to live, with patience wait
 Th' appointed hour; too soon that hour will come,
 Tho' Nature run her course. But Nature's God, 235
 If need require, by thousand various ways,
 Without thy aid, can shorten that short span,
 And quench the lamp of life. O when he comes,
 Rous'd by the cry of wickedness * extreme,
 To Heav'n ascending from some guilty land 240
 Now ripe for vengeance; when he comes array'd
 In all the terrors of Almighty wrath,

Forth

* Psal. lxxiv. ii.

Forth from his bosom plucks his ling'ring arm *,
 And on the miscreants pours destruction down,
 Who can abide his coming ? † Who can bear 245
 His whole displeasure ? In no common form
 Death then appears, but starting into size
 Enormous, measures with gigantic stride
 Th' astonish'd earth, and from his looks throws round
 Unutterable horror and dismay. 250
 All nature lends her aid. Each element
 Arms in his cause. Ope fly the doors of heav'n ;
 The fountains of the deep their barriers break ;
 Above, below, the rival torrents pour,
 And drown Creation ‡ ; or in floods of fire 255
 Descends a livid cataract, and consumes
 An impious race ||. Sometimes, when all seems peace,
 Wakes the grim whirlwind, and with rude embrace
 Sweeps nations to their grave, or in the deep
 Whelms the proud wooden world ; full many a youth
 Floats on his wat'ry bier, or lies unwept 261
 On some sad desert shore ! At dead of night,

B 4

In

* Gen. xviii. 20.

† Mal. iii. 2.

‡ Gen. vii. 11.

§ Gen. xix. 24.

In sullen silence stalks forth Pestilence *:
 Contagion, close behind, taints all her steps
 With pois'nous dew ; no smiting hand is seen, 265
 No sound 'is heard, but soon her secret path
 Is mark'd with desolation ; heaps on heaps
 Promiscuous drop. No friend, no refuge, near ;
 All, all is false and treacherous around ;
 All that they touch, or taste, or breathe, is Death. 270
 But ah ! what means that ruinous roar ? why fail
 These tott'ring feet ? Earth to its centre feels
 The Godhead's power, and trembling at his touch
 Through all its pillars, and in ev'ry pore,
 Hurls to the ground with one convulsive heave 275
 Precipitating domes, and towns, and tow'rs,
 The work of ages. Crush'd beneath the weight
 Of gen'ral devastation, millions find
 One common grave ; nor ev'n a widow left
 To wail her sons: the house, that should protect, 280
 Entombs its master ; and the faithless plain,
 If there he flies for help, with sudden yawn

Starts

* Psal. xci. 6.

Starts from beneath him*. Shield me, gracious heav'n,
 O snatch me from destruction ! If this Globe,
 This solid Globe, which thine own hand hath made 285
 So firm and sure, if this my steps betray ;
 If my own mother Earth, from whence I sprung,
 Rise up with rage unnatural to devour
 Her wretched offspring, whither shall I fly ?
 Where look for succour ? Where but up to Thee, 290
 Almighty Father ? Save, O save, thy suppliant
 From horrors such as these ! At thy good time
 Let Death approach ; I reckon not—Let him but come
 In genuine form, not with thy vengeance arm'd,
 Too much for man to bear. O rather lend 295
 Thy kindly aid to mitigate his stroke ;
 And at that hour when all aghast I stand
 (A trembling candidate for thy compassion)
 On this World's brink, and look into the next ;
 When my soul starting from the dark unknown 300
 Casts back a wishful look, and fondly clings
 To her frail prop, unwilling to be wrench'd


From

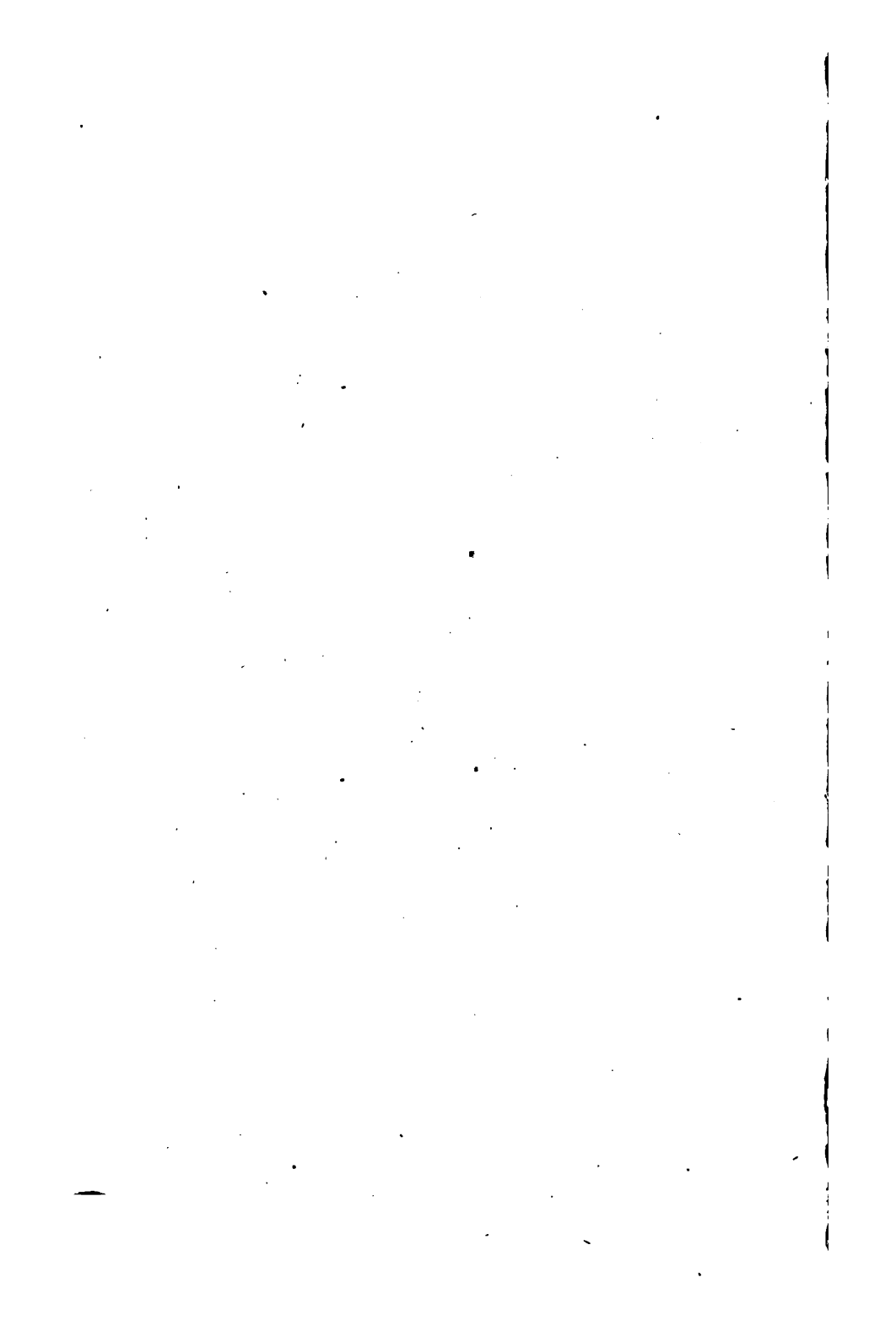
* In allusion to the earthquake at Lisbon in 1755.

From this fair scene, from all her custom'd joys,
 And all the lovely relatives of life ;
 Then shed thy comforts o'er me, then put on 305
 The gentlest of thy looks. Let no dark crimes,
 In all their hideous forms then starting up,
 Plant themselves round my couch in grim array,
 And stab my bleeding heart with two-edg'd torture
 Sense of past guilt, and dread of future woe. 310
 Far be the ghastly crew ! And in their stead
 Let cheerful Memory, from her purest cells,
 Lead forth a goodly train of Virtues fair,
 Cherish'd in earliest youth, now paying back
 With tenfold usury the pious care, 315
 And pouring o'er my wounds the heav'nly balm
 Of conscious innocence. But chiefly Thou,
 Whom soft-ey'd Pity once led down from Heav'n
 To bleed for man, to teach him how to live,
 And, oh ! still harder lesson ! how to die ; 320
 Disdain not Thou to smooth the restless bed
 Of sickness and of pain. Forgive the tear
 That feeble Nature drops, calm all her fears,

Wake

Wake all her hopes, and animate her faith,
Fill my rapt Soul, anticipating Heav'n, 325
Bursts from the thraldom of incumb'ring clay,
And on the wing of Extasy upborne,
Springs into Liberty, and Light, and Life.





EPITAPH

ON

KING GEORGE THE SECOND,

BY

BELLBY PORTEUS, M. A.

NOW LORD BISHOP OF LONDON.

THIS marble boasts what once was truly great.
The friend of Man, the Father of his State.
To check Ambition in its wild career,
To wipe from Misery's eye the starting tear;
By well-plann'd laws Oppression to controul ; 5
By kindest deeds to captivate the soul ;
Stern Justice' sword to guide with Mercy's hand,
And guard the Freedom of a glorious land ;
These were his arts—these Heav'n approved, and shed
Unnumber'd blessings on his hoary head. 10

Forc'd

Forc'd into arms, he stretch'd his generous sway
 Wide as the Sun extends his genial ray ;
 Yet saw (blest privilege) his Britons share
 The smiles of Peace amidst the rage of War ;
 Saw to his shores increasing commerce roll, 15
 And floods of wealth flow in from either pole :
 Warm'd by his influence, by his bounty fed,
 Saw Science raise her venerable head ;
 Whilst at his feet expiring faction lay,
 No contest left but who should best obey : 20
 Saw in his offspring all himself renewed,
 The same fair path of glory still pursued :
 Saw to young GEORGE, AUGUSTA's cares impart
 Whate'er could raise or humanize the heart,
 Blend all his grandsire's virtues with his own, 25
 And form their mingled radiance for the Throne—
 No further blessing could on earth be giv'n ;
 The next degree of happiness was—Heaven.

